



Testimony of
Amy Webb
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AMVETS

Before the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Health

Legislative Hearing on the topic of:
H.R. 93, H.R. 501, H.R. 1063, H.R. 1066, H.R. 1943, H.R. 1972, H.R. 2147,
H.R. 2225, H.R. 2327
and
A Draft Bill

**Executive Summary of
Amy Webb, National Legislative Policy Advisor
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Before the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Health
On
“Pending Health Care Legislation”**

September 26, 2017

H.R. 93 to Provide Increased Access to Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Care for Women Veterans	Support
H.R. 501 VA Transparency Enhancement Act of 2017	Support
H.R. 1063 Veteran Prescription Continuity Act	Support
H.R. 1066 VA Management Alignment Act of 2017	Support
H.R. 1943 Restoring Maximum Mobility to Our Nation's Veterans Act of 2017	Support
H.R. 1972 VA Billing Accountability Act	Support
H.R. 2147 Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017	Support
H.R. 2225 Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act	Support
H.R. 2327 PAWS Act of 2017	Support
Draft to Make Certain Improvements to VA's HPEAP	Support

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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, and all members of the committee; thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of AMVETS' 250,000 members. We are particularly thankful for your efforts to address some of the most challenging and longstanding veteran health care issues. We appreciate the dedication of your staff members who are working diligently to formulate policies that ensure we are taking care of our Nation's veterans.

**H.R. 93: Provide Increased Access to Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Care for
Women Veterans**

AMVETS supports H.R. 93

H.R. 93 ensures that gender specific services are continuously available at every VA medical center and community based outpatient clinic.

This bill is strongly aligned with our National Resolution on Women Veterans Health care which states, in part, that AMVETS urges DoD and VA to enhance their programs to ensure that women veterans receive high-quality, comprehensive primary and mental health care services in a safe and sensitive environment at every VA health care facility.

H.R. 501 VA Transparency Enhancement Act of 2017

AMVETS supports H.R. 501

This bill increases reporting requirements from VA medical facilities regarding post-surgical infections, and cancelled or transferred surgeries.

AMVETS has a National Resolution on VA Accountability, and we believe that transparency is equally important. Any measure which seeks to improve the health care and health outcomes of veterans is something that we not only support, but advocate for as part of our organizational mission.

H.R. 1063 Veteran Prescription Continuity Act

AMVETS supports H.R. 1063

H.R. 1063 improves the care of individuals transferring from receiving treatment from the Department of Defense to the Department of Veterans Affairs by ensuring that any pharmaceuticals the patient is taking at the time of transfer that are not listed on the Joint Uniform Formulary for Transition of Care would be able to still be prescribed until such point where it was deemed they were no longer needed.

AMVETS believes it is imperative to offer servicemembers transitioning into veteran status the continuity of care that medical professionals believe is in their best interest. Allowing the continuation of needed medication, whether or not it is listed in the Joint Uniform Formulary, is something that is important and we urge passage of this bill.

H.R. 1066 VA Management Alignment Act of 2017

AMVETS supports H.R. 1066

H.R. 1066 increases the reporting requirements of the Department of Veterans Affairs related to the roles, responsibilities and accountability of the departments and its key leaders and staff.

This bill falls well under our National Resolution on VA Accountability. As VA works to ensure that those in all levels of employment are upholding their commitments and dedication to serving veterans, we encourage this type of reporting so that the different roles of different departments can be adjusted and enhanced to better serve those who have stood up to serve this country. This is VA's purported mission and we support all levels of improved excellence.

H.R. 1943 Restoring Maximum Mobility to Our Nation's Veterans Act of 2017

AMVETS supports H.R. 1943

This bill ensures that veterans with a service-connected disability may be furnished a wheelchair to restore an ability to participate in recreational activities and clarifies that wheelchairs

furnished to these veterans should be intended to help the veteran achieve mobility and function in the activities of daily life and employment in addition to recreation.

AMVETS supports this bill as it falls in line with our National Resolution on Prosthetics and Sensory Aids, and we also support in the spirit of encouraging veterans of all abilities to be as active as they are able. From VA's sports clinics to its wheelchair games, it is quite evident that when veterans realize that they are capable of participation and involvement in activities they were not sure was possible after being injured or wounded, that it improves their physical and mental health.

H.R. 1972 VA Billing Accountability Act

AMVETS supports H.R. 1972

H.R. 1972 waives the requirement of certain veterans to make copayments for VA medical care, and prescriptions if the Department made errors in properly notifying the veteran that a payment was required, and if the notification was received more than three months after the date of service. It will be required that the veteran is given information on how to apply for a waiver, or to establish a payment plan. For medical care received outside of VA, the veteran must be notified of a payment due within 18 months of service.

AMVETS supports this protective measure of veterans, who should not be held liable if VA is not properly billing its patients, whether they receive care within or outside of the VA health care system.

H.R. 2147 Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017

AMVETS supports H.R. 2147

H.R. 2147 would require the Secretary of VA to hire additional Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Specialists, and AMVETS enthusiastically supports this bill. Many veterans have specific needs and challenges related to their military service. AMVETS has been involved with veteran treatment courts since their inception – starting with our then Commander J.P. Brown who worked with Judge Russell in Buffalo New York who in January of 2008 created and began presiding over the nation's first Veterans Treatment Court. Commander Brown took that knowledge and spearheaded the creation of a veteran treatment court in his home state of Ohio where about 100 veterans have since gone through the system. Of those, only four have had to leave due to noncompliance. The 96 others have completed two years of treatment which combines VA services, Social Services, veteran and family counseling, and four mental health agencies. The veteran is also paired with a mentor. The court itself acts just like a regular court, and if the veteran client pleads guilty and completes the 2-year program, then the charges are dropped. It is a key legislative priority of ours to see these

courts expanded and we appreciate that the bill would add more VJO Specialists. There are many solid systems in place to help veterans, but they will not properly function without adequate staffing.

H.R. 2225 Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act

AMVETS supports H.R. 2225

H.R. 2225 creates a five-year pilot program to study the effectiveness of treating post-deployment mental health symptoms by having eligible veterans learn how to train service dogs through the VHA's Center for Compassionate Innovation's Recreation Therapy Service. VA would be required to establish and hire a director of therapeutic service dog training who has a background in social services; experience teaching others to train service dogs in a vocational setting; and a minimum of a year working in a clinical setting with veterans or those on active duty with PTSD. In choosing dog training instructors, there would be preference given to veterans who have graduated from PTSD or other residential treatment programs and who are certified in service dog training.

Veterans participating in the pilot would do so in conjunction with VA's vocational rehabilitation Compensated Work Therapy program. Non-governmental entities would be contracted to perform the assessments of the pilot which include how stigma is reduced, improvements to emotional regulation and patience, reintegrating into the community, improving sleep patterns and instilling a sense of purpose.

The intent of this bill is in line with our National Resolution on VA mental health care that strongly recommends Congress appropriate more dedicated funding for mental health care and related programs and services. AMVETS is also a strong proponent of the benefits of service dogs, and believes that veterans in this pilot program would benefit by being in the leadership position to help train these canines that can change and better the lives of the fellow veterans they end up being paired with.

H.R. 2327 PAWS Act of 2017

AMVETS Supports H.R. 2327

The Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Act creates a five-year pilot program assessing the benefits of pairing a service dog with veterans suffering from severe PTSD, in an effort to reduce the concerning veteran suicide rate. The VA would provide \$25,000 to eligible organizations for the procurement and training of each service dog paired with a veteran in addition to any necessary hardware, travel expenses for the veteran to obtain the service dog, or any potential replacement service dog, and a veterinary health insurance policy for the life of the dog.

In order for a veteran to be eligible for the pilot they must be enrolled in VA healthcare and have completed an established evidence-based treatment for PTSD without suitable improvement so as they still remain diagnosed under the PTSD checklist (PCL-5) and their mental health care provider determines that they may potentially benefit from a service dog. Once accepted into the pilot, in order to remain eligible the veteran needs to maintain their relationship with their mental health care provider, and have office visits at least every six months to determine whether the veteran is benefitting from being paired with a service dog. If it is determined that the veteran is not benefitting than the eligible organization that provided the dog will decide how best to ensure the safety of the dog and the veteran.

While the VA does not compensate veterans for the care of service dogs that assist veterans with PTSD as they do for some other conditions, they remain in the midst of a \$12-million-dollar study to measure the cost and mental health benefits of pairing well-trained service dogs with veterans diagnosed with PTSD. The study also aims to compare service dogs and emotional support dogs in how they assist veterans with PTSD. Unfortunately, the study has been beset by many setbacks, including improper pairing of poorly trained dogs with veterans, and for being slow in acquiring and pairing dogs with veterans. After undergoing a pause and reorganization, the VA study picked back up in 2015 and according to the VA's Office of Research and Development website, "VA researchers are studying whether Veterans with PTSD can benefit from the use of service dogs or emotional support dogs. The study, being overseen by VA's Cooperative Studies Program, is enrolling 230 Veterans with PTSD from Atlanta, Iowa City, and Portland. To date, there is ample evidence on the benefits of service dogs for people with physical disabilities, but very little such evidence in the area of mental health." This particular study is set to be complete in 2018.

AMVETS has long seen the importance of well-trained and well-paired service dogs, and the impact this relationship has on individuals and veterans with physical and emotional illnesses or wounds. Service dogs can perform specific tasks to assist with the symptoms of PTSD such as learning commands to help secure space, turn on lights, sweep a room prior to a veteran entering and bark if anyone is present, to wake them up during a nightmare, remind them to take medication, and pick up on stress cues and offer calming support.

The AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary has worked with ADI accredited "Paws with a Cause" as its National Community Service program for nearly thirty years in a consistent effort to help veterans with visible and invisible wounds obtain a service dog to enhance their daily functioning. Through this partnership, AMVETS has seen firsthand the marked benefits to a veteran's quality of life when paired with a well-trained service dog.

The intent of this bill is in line with our National Resolution on VA mental health care that strongly recommends Congress appropriate more dedicated funding for mental health care and related programs and services. While AMVETS supports passage of the PAWS Act, it is with the stipulation that great care, consult, and oversight occur when awarding a contract to an organization that trains the service dogs; in choosing veterans who are able to manage the continued care and training the dog will require; in closely following those who are part of the pilot program; and in setting expectations for how quickly the veteran can obtain a dog. Fully trained service dogs are quite rarely immediately available, but once paired with

a receptive and willing owner, the benefits can be extraordinarily rewarding. AMVETS looks forward to providing any assistance needed to properly choose organizations that provide trained animals that can effectively support veterans with PTSD.

Discussion Draft: Make Certain Improvements to VA's HPEAP

AMVETS supports the discussion draft

This measure will improve the VA's Health Professionals Educational Assistance Program (HPEAP) by offering additional scholarships to those seeking to become a physician or dentist, and stipulates varying degrees of commitment to working full time at a VA medical facility in return for the scholarship, in addition to repayment parameters should the individual not meet the requirements of the scholarship.

In addition this measure would create a VA Specialty Loan Repayment Program in order to repay the loans of certain VHA physicians who are eligible to be board certified in areas that are deemed to be most needed in the areas of recruitment and retention.

Lastly, it would establish a veterans healing veterans pilot program to fund the educations of ten eligible veterans who have separated from the military within ten years, and who are not eligible for other educational assistance. They must apply for admission to one of five Teague-Cranston medical schools for 2019 and would be chosen for being veterans with the highest admissions rankings. If each of the five schools do not receive or award the two scholarships, then another school may award an additional scholarship in order for ten total scholarships to be awarded.

Quality recruitment and retention of high performing physicians and dentists at VA has been a longstanding and complex challenge. We believe that this measures offers offer some excellent solutions to this issue, albeit rather short term with the repayment in the form of time committed to working in VA rather short-term. We hope that in the interim VA is able to strengthen its ability to retain physicians long-term in the way of comparable compensation to the private sector, and internal organizational processes across the board that speak to VA's stated core values of: Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, Excellence ("I CARE").